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UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
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Address by
Mr Federico Mayor

Director-General
of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the inaugural
Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Lecture
delivered by His Excellency the Prime Minister of India
Mr P.V. Narasimha Rao

UNESCO, 12 June 1995

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Mr Prime Minister,
Madam Minister,
Excellencies,
Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a very great honour and pleasure for me to welcome your Excellency to UNESCO House to deliver the inaugural Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Lecture. Over the half-century of its existence, UNESCO has had the privilege of being addressed by a number of outstanding Indian personalities - Dr Radhakrishnan, Pandit Nehru, Maulana Azad, Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi. In this year of anniversaries, we are delighted to add another distinguished name to this list and to greet you warmly as a proven friend of UNESCO. I also wish to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the **people** of India for all those qualities that have made their country the world's largest democracy - and, in particular, to the women of India, who in so many ways embody its spirit.

Speaking in 1956 to the tenth General Conference of UNESCO held in New Delhi, Prime Minister Nehru referred to the 'hunger for peace of the peoples of the world' which had brought the United Nations into being. Quoting the Preamble to UNESCO's Constitution, he said that just as the United Nations General Assembly was intended to represent 'the political will of the world community' so UNESCO 'might be said to represent the conscience of the world community'. Conscience and a commitment to moral values were essential to attaining 'the objectives of international peace and of the common welfare of mankind'.

Today, as we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the adoption of UNESCO's Constitution along with the founding of the United Nations, it is clearer than ever that peace is more than simply a matter of 'political and economic arrangements between governments' and that peace must 'be founded, if it is not to fail, upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind'. Promoting such solidarity, in a world where so many continue to hunger in vain for peace, freedom, justice, equality and dignity, remains a mission of supreme importance.

In this anniversary year, we all need to reflect on the institutional shortcomings that limit the international community's capacity to deal with the problems confronting it. But if we are to move closer towards realizing the ideals proclaimed in the name of the 'peoples of the United Nations', it is essential that 'We the peoples' play our full part in the pursuit of those ideals. One of our first responsibilities - identified as such in the Charter of the United Nations- is 'to practise tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours'. To highlight this minimum condition of human solidarity, 1995 was declared United Nations Year for Tolerance on the initiative of UNESCO. As lead agency for the Year, UNESCO is currently co-ordinating a worldwide programme of seminars, concerts, publications and exhibitions as well as educational activities on the theme of tolerance. Only last month I attended a major regional conference on this subject in New Delhi where you, Sir, underlined your own and India's strong and consistent support for this important undertaking.

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It is a happy coincidence that the Year for Tolerance should be celebrated at the same time as the hundred-and-twenty-fifth anniversary of the birth of Mahatma Gandhi, who embodied the spirit of tolerance. This was inherent in his philosophy and practice of nonviolence, in his vision of all human beings as engaged in a search for a Truth that transcended them. Gandhiji was a nationalist but neither parochial nor chauvinist. He was the practitioner of a universal religion that respected all cultures. What he had to say about the interaction between diverse cultures aptly sums up the message of UNESCO: 'I do not wish my house to be walled on all sides and my windows stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any'. Gandhi's tireless quest to attain the universal through the individual - recalling a central theme in the writings of his great contemporary Rabindranath Tagore - has made him a spiritual pathfinder to a new millennium.

Gandhi is a vital source of inspiration wherever men and women seek to oppose violence and injustice by mobilizing their fellow beings in support of a larger vision of unity. His thought was at the heart of Martin Luther King's civil rights campaign in the United States. Nelson Mandela has spoken of Gandhi's 'incalculable influence' on the history of South Africa. In recognition of his seminal contribution to the growth of a culture of peace, UNESCO has this year struck an anniversary Mahatma Gandhi medal bearing the inscription: 'In the midst of darkness, light prevails'. It has also instituted the series of lectures inaugurated today, to explore and highlight Gandhi's relevance in our world of multiple transitions.

Who better to inaugurate this series of lectures in memory of Mahatma Gandhi than Prime Minister Narasimha Rao? He is a politician and statesman whose breadth of experience is matched only by the range of his interests. In a political career spanning almost half a century, he has served as General Secretary of the All-India Congress Committee, as Chief Minister of the Andhra Pradesh State Government, successively as Union Minister of External Affairs, Home Affairs, Defence, Human Resource Development and - again - External Affairs, and since 1991 as Prime Minister of India. Scholar and translator of classical texts from and into the Telugu language, his interests range from international relations, political thought, languages, literature, music and informatics to Indian philosophy and culture. He is a longstanding disciple of Mahatma Gandhi.

The hallmark of Narasimha Rao's political career has been his concern with social justice and social harmony and his commitment to education as a means to their attainment. As Minister of Human Resource Development, he was instrumental in formulating the National Education Policy in 1986. As Prime Minister he has placed education at the centre of national development strategy. I wish here to pay a personal tribute to Your Excellency for the strong support you have given to the Education for All process launched at Jomtien in 1990 and for the decision announced in December 1993 at the New Delhi Summit of the Nine 'Giants' to increase the proportion of India's GNP devoted to education from 3.6 to 6 per cent. You have acted upon your belief - of which you spoke to me at our last meeting in New Delhi - that without education nothing of value can happen. You have helped through your enlightened leadership to signpost the path to peace and progress in the years ahead.

The events of this century have all too often justified the disenchanted comment of the French poet Charles Péguy: 'Tout commence en mystique et finit en politique' (Everything begins in mysticism and ends in politics). Yet I am convinced that, through educational empowerment and the example of exceptional beings such as Mahatma Gandhi, we can succeed in infusing values and spirituality into our political **mores**. The process may be slow, almost geological, but I believe in the power of the spirit to shape our common future. If I may

quote some words I myself wrote in a contribution to a special edition of *Indian Horizons* to mark the anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's birth: 'Drop by drop, drop by drop, the water's force - gentle, flexible, persistent - pierces the rock, the sturdiest pillar yields to the steady liquid thrust (...). We shall go forward together, all different, travellers on the road towards bright dawns, armed only with the force of our ideals, with the indomitable will to conquer by inventing new pathways and with songs of peace on our lips. Without rancour, but undocile because the hour of the rebellion of the spirit has arrived'.

Your Excellency,

I think I have said enough by way of presentation, and I am now perhaps anticipating what you yourself may wish to say on Gandhiji. I shall therefore conclude by thanking you once again for being with us at UNESCO and sharing with us your thoughts on one of the truly great figures of our - or any - century.